

Campus Visit

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‘So’, said Dr. Hauser, just as he inserted a smallish forkful of thinly sliced meat between his lips, ‘how are you finding your visit thus far?’

A droplet of dark red liquid escaped from the corner of his mouth. He must have felt it tickling as it dribbled toward his chin; he arrested its progress with a single deft swab of his napkin.

‘It’s been exciting’, said David, trying not to let the corners of his smile flag. ‘Very exciting. I’ve enjoyed meeting everyone. This seems like quite a collegial place to be, which is something I appreciate’.

Dr. Hauser was still chewing, and David felt pressure to fill the silence. This, he knew, was something he had to work on.

‘Collegiality’, he said, aware that he was babbling just a bit, ‘is very important to me’.

Dr. Hauser nodded sagely and swallowed his mouthful. Dabbing at the corners of his mouth with his napkin, he gestured with his chin at David’s plate, still piled with untouched potatoes and now-lukewarm meat.

‘Please, dig in. We’re very proud of the food at our dining hall. The meat, in particular, is very fresh’.

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Dr. Hauser had picked David up from his hotel early that morning, and they'd breakfasted at the dining hall with the handful of other faculty members who were in at that time of day. The eggs were airy, fluffy, pillow-soft. The bacon was salty and thick. *Fresh*, David thought, stabbing the last piece with his fork.

A tour followed. The atmosphere on campus was perfect: prestigious and idyllic at the same time, just as a small residential college ought to be. David felt a world away from the grubby regional airport into which he'd flown the night before. *What a treasure this place is*, he thought, *hidden away in the middle of nowhere*.

It was autumn, crisp but not cold, and the leaves gathered just so on the stone walkways leading from building to building. The facilities were quietly immaculate, betraying no sign of the effort needed to maintain them in such a state.

Genteel, David thought, was the word for it.

The school, he knew, was both expensive and competitive. The students he passed positively glowed: happy, healthy, rosy-cheeked, smiling and laughing with one another, all vests and backpacks and denim in tans and browns. They were the luckiest people in the world. At least, David thought so.

After the campus tour he delivered a talk on his research. The audience of students and faculty members paid polite attention and peppered him afterward with perceptive and engaging questions. David felt that he was appropriately nimble in his responses, considering each question respectfully and responding to it without fully committing to any position with which a faculty member might take issue. At the end of the talk he'd received handshakes and encouraging comments from faculty and students alike.

The research presentation, David knew, was the most important part of the interview process, so he coasted to lunch with Dr. Hauser on a bit of a high, enjoying the tail end of the nervous energy he'd built up over the course of the morning. He decided not to beat himself up too much for rambling. Dr. Hauser had done this before; he'd understand.

David turned to his food, at Dr. Hauser's urging, and cut off a smallish rectangle of meat. He took it on his fork, brought it to his mouth, and tasted.

Dr. Hauser was right. It was fresh. Succulent. Delicious, even at room temperature.

David felt a droplet of meat juice escape from the corner of his mouth, and he smiled as he dabbed at it with his napkin. Dr. Hauser smiled back.

'Very fresh', said David, wanting to share his appreciation.

'Yes', said Dr. Hauser. 'Top quality'.

He paused. 'We don't accept anything less', he said, after a moment, then leaned back in his chair like the most satisfied man in the world.

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Heavy with meat, the two men made their way slowly down the wide staircase and out of the building. The afternoon air was pleasantly bracing after a lunch just a touch larger than it should have been.

Steps away, David noticed a rectangular, one-story structure he hadn't seen before, attached to the dining hall but plainly constructed separately, perhaps as an addition, emerging from one side of the larger building like half a limb. Something about

its design struck David as out of place, and it took a moment before he realized what it was: It had no windows.

‘What’s that?’ asked David.

‘That’, said Dr. Hauser, and then he paused. ‘That’, he said again.

Dr. Hauser stopped walking. He looked at David, tilting his head, considering—it appeared—searching David’s face for a few long moments. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

‘That’, said Dr. Hauser, ‘is our Office of Student Processing’.

He stepped toward the windowless structure and called to David over his shoulder.

‘Let’s go and say hello, shall we?’

The door to the Office of Student Processing was heavy—heavier than any other David had encountered on campus—and the sign that marked it was visible only from very near the entrance. Inside, the reception room was tiny. A gleaming, stainless steel countertop emerged from one wall at about chest height, extended to a sharp corner, and then ran the length of the room to a door at the back, also steel, duller in finish. This shaped the chamber into a sort of funnel, wider at the entrance—though barely large enough for Dr. Hauser, David, and the two folding chairs pressed against the wall—and then narrowing sharply at the corner of the counter, leaving a track between the countertop and the wall wide enough for a single file march toward the back door.

Following Dr. Hauser inside, hearing the door close behind him, David felt a vague sense of nausea, even panic, at the transition from the expansive, windswept

outside to the claustrophobic stillness within. The counters, the steel, unnerved him for reasons he couldn't quite capture.

'Hi!' said a voice from behind the counter. David heard a chair's wheels squeak, and then a head popped into view. He recognized the tone and smile, the layered bob with highlights, the plump middle-aged-ness as signs that she was staff, not faculty, and he adjusted his affect to make the appropriate impression. 'Hi!' he responded, smiling perkily in return. *I value your contribution. Happy to be here.*

Dr. Hauser stepped up to the counter and rested his elbows. 'Kathy, this is Dr. Sterner; he's visiting our campus for the day and may be joining us in the future. David, Kathy'. He allowed a moment for the two to gaze blankly at one another. 'Kathy, is Vince in?'

'He is', said Kathy, still all smiles. David thought she looked vaguely like a hamster. He felt the corners of his mouth start to sag and quickly perked them back up. 'Let me just call back and make sure he's not in the middle of anything'.

While Kathy called, Dr. Hauser drummed his fingers distractedly on the countertop, making a sound almost like a muted cymbal when his fingernails struck the surface. All at once, David hit on the reason the counters were so unnerving. They were, he realized, the same countertops on which the dining hall workers had carved and served his meat.

'Go right on back', Kathy said, and David beamed one last smile at her before following Dr. Hauser, single file, along the edge of the counter to the door. Just before passing through, David turned and looked back, his unease growing, longing to be back outside in the fresh, open air.

Kathy had turned in her chair to follow their progress, and she now stared back at him, unblinking, her hamster smile plastered to her face.

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Vince's office was spacious and pristine, almost surgically so. When David was introduced, the man's hand nearly crushed his own; it was massive, calloused and hard.

Framed prints were spaced evenly along the office walls. Looking closely at one of them, David saw that it was a diagram of a pig, separated neatly into sections according to the available cuts of meat.

'Family business', Vince said, and shared a quick look with Dr. Hauser. David realized that both men were waiting for him to speak.

'So, um, what is the purpose of the Office of Student Processing?' David asked, putting what he hoped was a pleasant and eager note into the question.

'Why, to process students, David', said Dr. Hauser, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. He and Vince shared a chuckle, and then Vince leaned forward in his chair, as if to say: *But seriously*.

'It's a very good question, David, and I'm glad Dr. Hauser brought you here. There have been occasions in the past when new faculty weren't aware of our office, and became—'

Vince looked over at Dr. Hauser for just a moment.

'—Upset when they learned of its existence and purpose. So we believe it's best to put our cards on the table, so to speak, as early as possible, to make sure that there aren't any misunderstandings down the line'.

David had been nodding along, brow slightly furrowed, projecting interest and understanding. Now Vince paused, and so he stopped nodding and waited for Vince to continue. He looked to his right and saw that Dr. Hauser was observing him carefully, leaning back in his chair, eyes fixed on David's face. On the wall behind Dr. Hauser was another animal diagram, this one of a cow, sectioned, like the other, into butcher's cuts.

Vince leaned forward even further, resting his elbows on the desk, folding his giant hands together under his chin. David turned back to face him.

'You wouldn't know it from our rankings, David, but we're actually fairly generous in our admissions. We try to be as open as possible, especially to students who catch our interest, students we think might enrich our campus community. This is a challenge, but it's part of our mission, and it's important to us'.

'I've been here a long time, David', Dr. Hauser broke in. 'It's always been the most challenging part of our mission to attract a broad range of students with a wide variety of life experiences. The most challenging and the most rewarding'.

Vince nodded. 'Rewarding in so many ways. And this office is our way of meeting that challenge while maintaining an academic environment that lives up to our standards'.

David had stopped nodding, his feigned interest giving way to real curiosity. He looked from Vince to Dr. Hauser, and then back to Vince. There were no windows in the room and therefore no sunlight, but Vince's bald head gleamed in the glow of his desk lamp in a way that reminded David of the stainless steel countertops in the outer office.

'When a student is having trouble meeting expectations in one of his or her classes', Vince continued, 'we ask that his or her instructor refer the student to the Office

of Academic Advisement. Our academic advisors can help students strategize, connect them with tutors, and provide the kind of individual attention that some students—particularly those students who may not have come to us with the strongest preparation—need to succeed’.

‘Our advisors do wonderful work’, Dr. Hauser threw in.

‘They do indeed’, said Vince. ‘But it’s sometimes the case that a student becomes overwhelmed, or finds it difficult to keep up, not just in one class, but in all of his or her classes. In cases like that, when the kind of help our advisors can offer just isn’t enough, they come to us. We’re sort of a last stop’—here Vince shared another momentary look with Dr. Hauser—‘where a student in that situation either finds the wherewithal to overcome his or her difficulties or is, so to speak, consumed by them’.

Vince held David’s eyes, gauging his reaction. David turned and saw that Dr. Hauser was doing the same.

‘I know it sounds a little cold-blooded’, said Vince. ‘But we really are deeply invested in providing our students with as much help, and as much attention, as we can, especially those students to whom we extend a bit of extra help in our admissions process, whose presence we really cherish on our campus’.

‘We so value their voices in the classroom’, said Dr. Hauser.

‘But it’s also especially important for us to maintain our academic expectations’, said Vince, ‘and not to compromise on the kind of academic environment we create. We expect—we demand—top quality’.

Vince and Dr. Hauser were both nodding. David found himself nodding, too.

‘We don’t accept anything less’, said Dr. Hauser, with an air of finality.

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Leaving Vince's office, David stopped to look at the row of heavy doors across the wide hallway. They were dull steel, scratched from use, with large handles instead of doorknobs. Vince made no move to open them.

'Our processing sessions are closed', he said. 'I'm sure you understand'.

Vince walked David and Dr. Hauser back to the outer office, and Kathy beamed a goodbye smile from the other side of the steel countertop. David, for no reason he could identify, felt ill.

Dr. Hauser seemed to understand David's unease without being told. He found David a study carrel in the library, and recommended rest and contemplation. He'd be back to retrieve David for dinner, he said, in about an hour and a half. On his way out, Dr. Hauser turned, considered David for a moment, and then spoke.

'I haven't consulted with the other members of the committee', he said, 'but I think it's safe to say that you're our preferred candidate. I hope you'll let me know if there's anything you'd like to discuss further while you're with us'.

David nodded, wanting more than anything to be alone. Dr. Hauser left the carrel, and David put his head down on the desk and immediately fell asleep. His dreams were unpleasant.

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David woke, blinking, to find Dr. Hauser standing in the doorway of the carrel. He lifted his head, then twisted and stretched cautiously, testing for soreness from the awkward sleeping position. He felt fine. More than fine, he felt entirely at ease, refreshed, shaking away the post-doze grogginess, happy to be up and about again.

Then Dr. Hauser said, 'Let's go to dinner, shall we?' and David's uneasiness returned all at once.

The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach was immediate. As he rose and followed Dr. Hauser down the hallway and toward the stairs, he began to sweat. Dr. Hauser's easy, friendly questions as the two men walked across campus fed a slow-building panic, and it was all David could do to muster grunts in the affirmative or negative, praying each time that his companion would remain silent. His heart pounded; he felt as though a train were about to hit him at maximum speed.

As the dining hall came into view, David's eyes were drawn immediately to the ugly, windowless appendage protruding from the side of the building. As before, the Office of Student Processing looked empty, abandoned. David knew it was not so.

Dr. Hauser must have noticed the direction of David's gaze. 'Let's have some dinner', he said gently. 'The group should be fairly large. We're all so excited to have you with us'.

The rich, heavy smell hit David as soon as he reached the top of the wide stairway. It washed over him and would not let him go.

Meat. Cooking, stewing, roasting, searing, simmering meat.

He nearly retched.

On shaky legs, he made his way into the large, open room. A group of faculty members clustered around the handful of tables nearest the door, moving to and from the many serving stations. A short man in a dark sweater, one of those who'd been present at David's presentation earlier in the day, approached, holding his plate and napkin in one

hand and fork in the other. As he came nearer, David noticed that there were crumbs embedded in his unkempt beard; this, David thought, must be the man's second helping.

The man was close now, and smiling. He gave his name, and David nodded dully, doing his best to maintain eye contact.

'How's your day been?' the man asked. 'Hauser been taking you around, showing you the sights?'

David nodded again, and managed to say something blandly complimentary about Dr. Hauser. He began to list the places he'd been shown, trying frantically to remember through what seemed like an ever-heavier fog; when he got to the Office of Student Processing, his interlocutor smiled even wider and shook his head.

'So you met Vince? Creepy, isn't he? Kind of a ghoul, really'.

David started. The man caught his reaction and spoke quickly.

'There's nothing really wrong with him, of course, and he does a great job with the kids. There's just something . . . unsettling about him, no? An intensity. Just a little bit off, is all'.

David was nodding vigorously now. The man seemed glad to have elicited agreement.

'It's not that he's a bad guy. Not at all. But sometimes when you're sitting in his office, and he's leaning over his desk and staring right at you, you think: If this guy told me he was a cannibal, I wouldn't be too surprised'.

David flinched, then closed his eyes. He couldn't tell whether the ringing in his ears had just started or had been there all along.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the bearded man's smile had vanished. He looked apprehensively at the man's plate, piled high with meat, and then back up into his face.

The man followed David's eyes, thought for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

'Hold on', he said, incredulity shining in his smile. 'Hold on, now. You didn't actually—'. He dissolved into laughter again, then looked searchingly into David's stricken face.

'Okay', he said. 'Okay'. He struggled to contain his mirth and compose an appropriate statement. 'Vince, yes, he's weird. I could see how it would be off-putting, certainly, to sit there while he and Hauser make crazy eyes at each other. It's a small world around here, and everybody gets a little strange after a while. You should meet Vince's wife. She makes him look buttoned-up'.

He searched David's face for the effect of his words.

'But you can't honestly have thought . . . look, to start with, who would pay the tuition if we ate all the students?'

He looked to David again for a response. This time, David managed a small smile.

'Okay', the man said, visibly relieved. 'Okay'. He looked from side to side, and then flashed David a conspiratorial grin. 'These campus visits are getting more and more stressful, huh? Enough to drive you a little bit crazy. That's okay. It would make me crazy, too. I can't imagine what the job market's like for you guys these days. The stress, the psychological strain. I'm just glad I got in when I did'.

David nodded, feeling his panic slowly give way to bone-deep exhaustion. He didn't know what to say to this man. How could he have allowed an idea like this—not even an idea: a lunatic notion, inarticulate and senseless and utterly ridiculous—to take hold of him on a day of almost immeasurable importance. What was wrong with him? How could he salvage this?

David took a deep breath and looked into the bearded man's face. The man nodded, all understanding. 'It really is ugly out there, isn't it?'

'It is', said David. 'It really is'.

The man nodded again, then put his hand on David's shoulder.

'Well', he said, 'I can't tell you how excited we are to have you here. I wish we could hire twice as many new people—three times as many—but things being as they are, we're just glad we still have tenure-track lines. I was at your talk, by the way. Really exciting stuff you're working on. I think it would absolutely catch the interest of our students'.

He guided David over to the nearest serving station. Picking up a plate, David suddenly realized he was famished.

'Venison', the man said, indicating the meat. 'Local. Top quality'. He paused. 'We only get it once or twice a year. Hauser loves the stuff. Can't get enough of it'. He paused again, then cocked his head at David. 'Don't tell me he brought you here for lunch, too?'

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After the meal, David walked with Dr. Hauser down the stairs and out the door. The conversation over dinner had flowed wonderfully; it was amazing, thought David,

how happy, how collegial, how content these men and women seemed. David felt that he had acquitted himself well, fielding questions about both research and teaching, holding the interest of his audience, making them laugh. Making them want him as a colleague.

When Dr. Hauser saw that the meal was drawing to a close, he huddled with the other members of the search committee while David entertained the academic dean over the remains of his apple torte. Later, just in front of the dining hall, Dr. Hauser put his hand on David's shoulder and turned the younger man to face him.

'I want you to know that we'll be making our recommendation in the morning', he said. 'I don't think this will come as a surprise, but we'll recommend strongly that you be extended an offer. You should hear within a few days'.

He paused and waited for David's response.

'That's . . . wonderful', David stammered, tired after his performance at dinner, elated but finding it difficult to form his words. 'Really wonderful'.

'I hope, as you consider our offer, that you'll be in touch with any questions that may occur to you'.

David nodded.

'We want to do everything we can to get you here, David. Let us know what we can do, and we'll try our best. Okay?'

David smiled, still nodding, and forced himself to focus. He thanked Dr. Hauser warmly, and expressed his excitement at the prospect of joining the faculty, noting the harmony between his goals as a teacher and scholar and the goals of the institution, and sharing his profound feeling of comfort on the campus and with his future colleagues.

As he and Dr. Hauser walked slowly toward the warm lights of the residence halls, David turned back, just for a moment, and found his attention captured again by the Office of Student Processing, squat and ugly, marring the stately grace of the dining hall with its brutishness. Just outside the front door, David noticed, sat a black, industrial-sized garbage bag.

Sticking out of the top of the bag was a human hand, limp on its forearm, visible to the elbow.

David stopped, looked harder. The world began to narrow and spin. *Oh no*, he thought. *Oh no oh no oh no oh no*.

Then the bag caught the light of a passing security golf cart on an adjacent path. The protuberance, thus illuminated, revealed itself: a cardboard tube, the sort around which posters or wrapping paper are often rolled, bent at the top, emerging from the bag at an odd angle.

David breathed. He closed his eyes, opened them again, and turned back to the path ahead of him. He smiled at Dr. Hauser, reiterated his enthusiasm for the position, and commented on the quality and variety of academic offerings available on such a small campus. Dr. Hauser nodded. David nodded back.

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